

PEOPLES OF THE LAKE NYASA REGION

621 every adult member is a matrilineal descendant of a single ancestress, or a spouse of
 614 one of these people. All husbands are called *alams* by the male members of the descent
 group, but husbands call each other by the kinship terms for older and younger
 [601] brother (i.e. *arimemi* or *nyemanga*) according to the seniority of their wives. Similarly
 undifferentiated in kinship terms are the wives of all men of the descent group, who
 call each other 'sister'.

591 The husband is expected to work in his wife's garden, to help his mother-in-law,
 606 and also, in the early stages of marriage, to avoid her. His attitude to his father-in-law
 is one of respect, relaxing as time goes on. His attitude to his wife's brother is also one
 of respect, which covers feelings of latent hostility. Although husband and wife's
 brother co-operate in affairs relating to the woman and her children (e.g. they jointly
 consult the diviner in case of illness, and the brother-in-law hears grievances the
 husband may have against his wife), there are elements of conflict arising from their
 competition for the affection of the woman and her children.

591 Patrilocal marriages are the rule in certain cases. The village headman commonly
 622 has his wife in his own village. At his death his widow may return to her own village,
 613 but if her daughters have married locally she may stay, and one of her sons, as warden
 of his sisters, will also stay and marry patrilocally, as did his father, the headman.
 621 Thus a new matrilineal descent group, linked to that of the headman by a patrilineal
 link, develops. In every generation the number of separate but related matrilineal
 descent groups would double, and at such a rate of proliferation it might be expected
 that any village would contain many family groups. In fact, however, most members
 of a village can trace their descent from a common ancestress removed not more than
 about five generations. There are two reasons for this degree of homogeneity in the
 kin-grouping in the villages. One is that the villages tend to split up as they become
 too large and complex. The other is that the introduction of a new matrilineal descent
 [582] group is often avoided by a cross-cousin marriage by the headman of the village or the
 warden of a sorority group.

605 There is a joking-relationship between cross-cousins, that is, for example, between
 582 the village headman's children and his sisters' children. The latter, as members of his
 descent group, have interests and loyalties opposed to those of his own children.
 Although there is a strong tradition of cross-cousin marriage, such marriages are said
 to be likely to be unstable.

BETROTHAL AND MARRIAGE

584 Child betrothal was common among the Yao. Acceptance of a loin-cloth and the
 wearing of it was token of betrothal, giving the groom exclusive rights over the girl.¹
 The negotiations for an adult marriage are conducted by senior matrilineal kinmen
 of the parties, who at the subsequent ceremony act as witnesses or sureties to the
 marriage. Usually the senior is the mother's brother, and the junior the brother. The
 585 act of validation, the *Cingome* rite, takes place some time after the husband and wife
 have been living together. They meet in the hut of the woman for the rite, which
 consists in eating two pots of porridge, prepared by the female relatives of each party.
 The man's people bring a cockerel and the woman's a hen for relish. The exchange of
 food symbolizes the exchange of members of each matrilineal kin group, which is

¹ Macdonald, 188a, vol. 1, p. 128; Johnson, 1897, pp. 411-13.

CHAPTER VII

THE PATRILATERALLY-LINKED GROUPS

THE POSITION OF THE HUSBAND AND FATHER

MATRILINEAL descent provides the principle on which the smallest of villages, the hamlets, are organized. But not all villages are made up of huts owned by members of one matrilineage as in Ali Kasunka's village.¹ Most villages in fact have a more complex internal organization which may be epitomized as a dominant matrilineage which carries the village headmanship, and a number of subsidiary lineages linked to the dominant lineage by various means. The most common of these is the patrilateral link whereby the subsidiary lineage is connected to the dominant lineage through one of its men.² The subsidiary lineage develops in the village from the matrilineal descendants of the virilocally-married wife of one of the men of the dominant lineage, so that the subsidiary lineage, initially at least, are the 'children' of one of the men of the headman's matrilineage. Their peculiar position in the village must be seen in the light of the general position of the father in Yao society.

The father, obviously enough, is also a son-in-law; obvious as this may seem in English it is charged with meaning for the Yao. When parents-in-law refer to their daughters' husbands they use the term *akewegwe*; and they in turn are called this by their sons-in-law. But the *akamwini* are essentially men who are living uxori locally and *akamwini* is the general status of being a man in uxori local marriage. *Akamwini* thus cannot be translated into English without periphrasis and I translate it merely as 'husband'. I emphasize, however, that whenever I speak of *husbands* or the *husband* in general I mean 'husbands in uxori local marriage'. The Yao assume that marriages as a rule are uxori local. Usually the young husband builds a house in his wife's village and is expected to live there for the rest of his life. But

¹ See Chap. VI, pp. 140-3.

² I have called this type of village structure the 'thorp' in my earlier essay, 'The Yao of Southern Nyasaland', *Seven Tribes*, 332 ff.

613 he cannot escape the fact that in his wife's village he is only
 513 a 'billy goat' and that his 'true home' is in his matrilineal
 • 606 village. The pull of the matrilineal village on him, therefore,
 511 is always very strong and he is constantly trying to return there.
 621 His wife's responsible relatives are constantly trying to avoid this
 because they know that in time they are likely to lose the children
 who will probably settle in their father's village if they grow
 up there. In general, therefore, a husband must have a very
 good reason before he can get his wife's kinsmen's permission
 to take her and her children to his village. His wife's relatives
 do not easily yield. But a headman must live in his own village
 so that nearly all headmen bring at least one of their wives into
 their villages. Other men sometimes succeed in doing so
 especially if their wives are past child-bearing, but it is typically
 the headman's wife who lives virilocally.

621 The husband's interest in returning to his matrilineal village
 511 is heightened by the fact that a man in his wife's village is looked
 551 upon as the typical man without prestige: a stranger, whose
 duty is largely procreative. The theme song at the installation
 ceremony where the husband was compared with a billy goat,
 and the common epithet 'chicken rooster' for a husband, reflect
 the attitude of the Yao towards him. In the song I quoted, the
 husband was said to be unable to climb high in his village of
 marriage, however rich he may become.¹ He is, nevertheless, an
 essential member of the village and the Yao say that it can succeed
 neither economically nor physically without his aid.

A husband becomes more important when he stays in a village
 for a long time. He becomes known intimately to the villagers
 and is conversant with their affairs. He is, therefore, able to
 advise on many private intra-lineage and intra-village affairs
 and may even become a marriage surety if there is no more
 suitable person available. Also in time the husband's position
 in the village changes. As his children grow up and become
 active members in the matrilineage, his position of husband
 becomes supplanted by his position of father, which, in a matri-
 lineal society like that of the Yao, is significant in the same way
 as that of the mother's brother is in patrilineal societies.

543 The Yao recognize the close bond between father and child.
 602 This bond is conceived to be both social and physical and is

¹ See Chap. V, p. 119.